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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000062

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: OPPOSITION HARASSED COLLECTING
SIGNATURES ON UPCOMING CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM

REF: BAKU 0016

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Donald Lu for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Across the country, members of opposition parties collecting signatures to register as campaign "advocacy" groups for the March referendum report being harassed by police. Several say they were detained for hours at police stations and had their signature sheets confiscated. There are reports from several regions that citizens who signed the opposition's signature sheets are being pressured into taking back their support. In order to register as a campaign group ahead of the vote on constitutional changes, the Central Election Commission (CEC) requires groups to submit 40,000 signatures by February 1. Despite previous optimism about meeting this goal, opposition parties are now worried they will not be able to gather the required signatures. The inability of opposition groups to gather signatures to oppose the constitutional changes further muddies the waters of an electoral process that is being hastily implemented and so far inadequately debated. End Summary.

¶2. (C) As reported reftel, opposition parties and many civil society groups decided to unite to gather signatures in order to register as campaign "advocacy" groups for the March 18 referendum on changes to Azerbaijan's Constitution. In meetings on January 13, 14, and 16, leaders of the Musavat, Umid, and Popular Front parties told poloff that they would not have problems collecting enough signatures to register as two separate campaign groups. While they explained that the rules released by the CEC on how to register were not transparent, and the timeline for gathering signatures was short, there was enough concern within the population of having a president for life that collecting the signatures would take only three to four days. By January 19 these groups had submitted the required documentation to the CEC and received official signature sheets.

¶3. (SBU) On January 21, however, police began harassing opposition party members who were collecting signatures. The Popular Front Party announced that two of its representatives in Sabirabad had been arrested, and heroin had been planted on one of them as a pretext for the arrest. Opposition press also reported harassment on the same day of opposition party members in Neftchala and Zardab.

¶4. (C) On January 22, police detained Musavat party members Fahraddin Abbasov and Azer Nariyev in Sumgayit while getting off a bus to collect signatures. Abbasov confirmed to poloff

that he was held in Sumgayit police station No. 2 for five hours, where his signature sheets were taken away from him. Abbasov reported that he had 36 signatures on his sheet at that time, and the police approached these 36 people while Abbasov was being held and asked them to come to the station to accuse Abbasov of forcing them to sign. Two men did so, but reportedly backed down at the police station when Abbasov convinced them that it was not illegal to sign the petition, and their identity cards would not be taken away from them. After a phone call by a Musavat Member of Parliament, Abbasov was released from jail.

15. (C) Also on January 22, police arrested Musavat party member Gudrat Mamayev in Zagatala while he was collecting signatures. Poloff spoke with the party leader in Zagatala region, Saleh Sultanov, who said that several leaders of village municipal councils told him that the Head of Zagatala Executive Committee (ExCom) called all the village leaders to a meeting and told them to prevent any signature collection. Musavat and Umid Party representatives have faced harassment by police throughout the Zagatala region. Sultanov also stated that police were confiscating signature sheets and then harassing citizens who had signed them. This tactic intimidates not only those who had signed, but also their neighbors, and Sultanov worried that his group would no longer be able to gather the signatures they need.

16. (C) Separately, Umid Party headquarters reported to the Embassy that its representatives in Gazakh and Lerik were harassed for collecting signatures. Gazakh representative Aziz Pirmammadov reportedly lost his job at the local

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electric company office. In the past, Umid leader Iqbal Agazade was seen as part of the "constructive" opposition, i.e. those that the government could count on to not cause trouble. Agazade did not boycott the 2008 presidential election, and earned second place in that contest. Since then, however, Agazade, a member of parliament, voted against the state budget, made a speech in parliament condemning the ban on foreign radio broadcasts, and joined the "traditional" opposition in an anti-referendum coalition. In a January 14 meeting with poloff, Agazade strongly condemned the anti-democratic nature of the referendum and ruling regime - a marked contrast from his tone during the presidential election.

COMMENT

17. (C) While not all press reports have been confirmed, the Embassy has confirmed a sufficient number of cases to conclude that there are incidents of harassment of both opposition members and those who signed their petitions across the country. This pattern of government officials harassing the opposition will make it difficult, if not impossible, for the groups advocating "no" on the referendum's proposals to gather the required 40,000 signatures in order to be registered. If no opposition groups are registered, the government will have effectively prevented legal, public debate on the referendum, which may call into question the legitimacy of the process.

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